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### **"Empowering Teens to Lead the War on Drugs"**

By Rep. Allen Boyd

As the father of a young teenager, one of my greatest concerns when I examine America today is the growing problem of substance abuse among our young people. Teenagers today live in a society where, even in their classrooms and neighborhoods, they are faced with peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol at an increasingly younger age. Our nation's young people have so much talent and opportunity, but sometimes in this confusing world, it is difficult for them to make the right decisions.

In an effort to bring attention to this issue, and to help find some solutions, I began my work with Coalitions United for a Drug Free North Florida, a project which I have sponsored to unite existing drug prevention efforts across North Florida. This summer, Coalitions United met with local law enforcement officers, educators, clergy, prevention professionals, counselors and local government officials to discuss the teen drug abuse problem. Following up on these discussions with community leaders, we organized a series of forums geared toward high school students. Joined by the Florida Prevention Association (FPA), I hosted a series of five teen drug abuse forums during Red Ribbon Week. The goal of each event was to empower students to identify the reasons behind teen substance abuse and to work to solve the problem.

The response was promising. All of the groups we addressed recognized drug and alcohol abuse as a substantial problem in their schools, and could identify the negative side effects associated with abuse. More importantly participants identified, time and time again, the same main cause of teen drug abuse in their communities: boredom. Young people across North Florida say they "have nothing better to do," and it is this lack of wholesome activities that frequently steers them to drugs and alcohol. It is boredom that leads young people to hang out at the local Wal-Mart parking lot, or congregate at the downtown mall, and it is boredom that ultimately leads some of them to drink or smoke pot.

Certainly, community and school-sponsored events are critical to any effort to provide teenagers with more positive activities to pursue. However, I believe the teen substance abuse problem cannot be solved without the leadership and active involvement of young people. With a little encouragement and guidance, local students can set up their own athletic leagues, mentoring programs and after-school activities. Indeed, these ideas were all offered by teens participating in these drug abuse forums.

As part of these forums, FPA Executive Director, Majken Peterzen and I talked to students about how to become active in drug prevention initiatives within their own communities. We encouraged them to reach out to community leaders and local government officials who can assist them in making their ideas a reality. Every local leader attending these forums affirmed their willingness to collaborate with young people in drug prevention efforts.

Students often forget that they can turn to community leaders for assistance. We must constantly remind these young people that this is *their* community, and they are just as important to the community's success as the adults. I was pleased with the enthusiasm that these students expressed when they realized

*they*

could be part of the answer to the teen substance abuse problem.

As a result of these drug abuse forums, a group of teens in Tallahassee have already begun to hold meetings to discuss how to implement drug prevention ideas of their own. Coalitions United will continue to support these young people and work to empower more teens across the Second Congressional District. I hope that you, as parents, neighbors, and friends, will also encourage teenagers to have the determination and initiative to seek out and put into place solutions to the substance abuse crisis.